Background and individual decision making

Academic considerations, such as high school preparation, performance and persistence, can certainly affect one's readiness for and access to (and, of course, success in) postsecondary education. However, family background and personal choices can also be important influences and/or determinants. We now turn to three of these issues: at-risk factors, marriage, and parenting.

At-risk of school failure The NELS:88/94 data contain information on 1988 eighth graders who were identified as "at risk" of dropping out of high school based on background and family circumstances present while in eighth grade.<10> The factors constituting risk were whether the student lived in a single-parent family, was from a family with an annual income of less than $15,000, had an older sibling who had dropped out of school, had parents who did not finish high school, had limited proficiency in English, and/or was at home without adult supervision more than three hours a day. Overall, 55 percent of NELS:88 participants showed no at-risk factors, 25 percent had one, and almost one-fifth, 19 percent, had two or more (Table 7A). Eighth graders with two or more of these factors present may experience a substantial barrier to postsecondary education participation and success.<11>

While the presence of two or more risk factors appears to be independent of gender, it is not independent of race/ethnicity or tested achievement. (Differences in the number of risk factors are not examined by socioeconomic status because family income and parent's education, two components of socioeconomic status, are also components of the "at-risk" variable. Thus, the number of risk factors is related to socioeconomic status, which would result in artificially inflated differences in risk factors for the different socioeconomic status groups.) A smaller percentage of Asians and whites, in comparison to blacks and Hispanics, had two or more risk factors (Table 7A). Eighth-grade risk factors are strongly associated with 1992 tested achievement, indicating a justification for concern that these factors affect students' learning opportunities. More than three-fourths of those in the highest test quartile had no risk factors, while only about half that percentage (37 percent) in the lowest test quartile had no risk factors. By contrast, only 5 percent of high tested achievement students had two or more risk factors, as did 16 percent of those in the middle two test quartiles and nearly one-third of those in the lowest test quartile (Table 7B).<12>

Table 7A   **Percentage of 1988 eighth graders with numbers of factors placing them at risk of school failure, by various characteristics**

	Zero	One	Two or more
Total	55.4	25.4	19.2
Sex			
Male	54.7	26.4	18.9
Female	56.1	24.4	19.5
Race/ethnicity			
Asian or Pacific Islander	59.5	25.7	14.9
Hispanic regardless of race	33.5	31.7	34.9
Black not of Hispanic origin	31.3	30.2	38.5
White not of Hispanic origin	63.1	23.5	13.4
Socioeconomic status (1992)			
Lowest quartile	16.2	29.0	54.8
Middle two quartiles	60.4	28.3	11.4
Highest quartile	79.4	16.8	3.8
Test quartile (1992)			
Lowest quartile	37.4	29.8	32.8
Middle two quartiles	58.9	24.7	16.4
Highest quartile	76.8	18.0	5.2

Source: NCES, National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988 9/25/95
Note: Rows may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Table 7B   **Percentage of 1988 eighth graders in the highest 1992 test quartile with numbers of factors placing them at risk of school failure, by various characteristics**

	Zero	One	Two or more
Total	76.8	18.0	5.2
Sex			
Male	78.2	16.8	5.0
Female	75.4	19.2	5.3
Race/ethnicity			
Asian or Pacific Islander	77.0	21.0	2.0
Hispanic regardless of race	55.8	29.0	15.2
Black not of Hispanic origin	45.0	38.6	16.4
White not of Hispanic origin	79.3	16.4	4.3
Socioeconomic status (1992)			
Lowest quartile	22.9	39.9	37.2
Middle two quartiles	72.7	21.2	6.1
Highest quartile	85.6	13.2	1.1

Source: NCES, National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988 9/25/95
Note: Rows may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Marriage and family formation   For purposes of postsecondary education decisions, which include attendance, intensity of enrollment, and financing of studies, it is unclear whether people in "marriage-like" relationships, who constituted 7 percent of 1988 eighth graders overall in 1994, behave more like single or married respondents (Table 8A). The number of divorced, separated, or widowed respondents is too small to draw conclusions about these members of the cohort. Consequently, married and single, never married cohort members constitute the focus of this discussion.

With regard to access and choice in postsecondary education, the impact of marriage by itself, without taking children in the household or other factors into consideration, is ambiguous. For example, marriage may provide financial support if one spouse is enrolled in a postsecondary institution and the other is employed, as well as providing stability, maturity, purpose, and other generally accepted positive byproducts. On the other hand, marriage can bring financial pressures. These, in turn, could affect the timing of participation in postsecondary education (i.e., delayed entry), a preference for part-time enrollment coupled with employment rather than full-time student status, and perhaps even a tendency to attend an institution or program closer to home.

Most 1988 eighth graders (83 percent), most of whom were about twenty years old, had never been married by 1994 (Table 8A). Higher reported marriage rates for 1988 eighth grade women is consistent with known tendencies for men to marry at a later age and for husbands to be several years older than their wives. Thus some women in the NELS:88 survey are married to men who are older than twenty and are therefore not in the 1988 eighth grade cohort. In every category less than fifteen percent of the population reported being married. The percent married decreases as one moves up socioeconomic and test quartiles.

A greater percentage of those in the highest test quartile group reported never having been married by 1994 (94 percent). Within the 1992 high tested achievement quartile there are no significant differences in reported marriage rates by race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status. However, those in the lowest and middle two socioeconomic quartiles have significantly lower rates of remaining single than those in the highest quartile (Table 8B).<13>

Unlike marriage, where there can be counterbalancing or offsetting forces as noted above, the presence of young children most likely constitutes a financial burden for the NELS:88 cohort member. This would in turn be expected to reduce immediate postsecondary education participation, or certainly limit it to part-time enrollments. Overall, approximately 16 percent of 1988 eighth graders reported having at least one child. The percentages of Asian and white 1988 eighth graders with children by 1994 were lower than for Hispanics or blacks (Table 9A).

When grouped by test quartiles, the percentage of 1988 eighth graders reporting no children varied inversely with tested achievement, and within the highest test quartile there were no reported differences by race/ethnicity. However, a greater proportion of those who were also in the highest socioeconomic quartile reported having no children than did those in the other two socioeconomic groupings (Table 9B).

Table 8A   Percentage of 1988 eighth graders reporting their marital status as of 1994, by various characteristics

	Single never married	Married	Divorced or separated or widowed	In marriage-like relationship
Total	82.6	9.3	1.3	6.9
Sex				
Male	87.6	6.0	1.1	5.3
Female	77.5	12.6	1.5	8.5
Race/ethnicity				
Asian or Pacific Islander	90.7	4.2	0.5	4.6
Hispanic regardless of race	74.8	14.2	1.4	9.6
Black not of Hispanic origin	89.3	3.2	0.3	7.2
White not of Hispanic origin	82.4	9.7	1.5	6.4
Socioeconomic status (1992)				
Lowest quartile	72.6	13.9	2.9	10.6
Middle two quartiles	82.5	10.1	1.0	6.4
Highest quartile	92.6	3.6	0.3	3.5
Test quartile (1992)				
Lowest quartile	76.6	13.4	1.3	8.8
Middle two quartiles	84.0	8.2	1.5	6.3
Highest quartile	94.2	2.9	0.3	2.6

Source: NCES, National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988-94 9/25/95
Note: Rows may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Table 8B   Percentage of 1988 eighth graders in the highest 1992 test quartile reporting their marital status as of 1994, by various characteristics

	Single never married	Married	Divorced or separated or widowed	In marriage-like relationship
Total	94.2	2.9	0.3	2.6
Sex				
Male	96.3	2.2	0.2	1.3
Female	92.0	3.7	0.4	3.9
Race/ethnicity				
Asian or Pacific Islander	96.1	1.8	1.3	0.8
Hispanic regardless of race	95.0	1.3	0.3	3.4
Black not of Hispanic origin	93.3	1.4	0.0	5.2
White not of Hispanic origin	94.0	3.2	0.3	2.5
Socioeconomic status (1992)				
Lowest quartile	83.2	7.8	1.1	7.9
Middle two quartiles	92.0	3.8	0.6	3.6
Highest quartile	97.1	1.7	0.0	1.2

Source: NCES, National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988-94 9/25/95
Note: Rows may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Table 9A   Percentage of 1988 eighth graders reporting number of children of their own as of 1994, by various characteristics

	None	One or more
Total	84.1	15.9
Sex		
Male	90.1	9.9
Female	78.1	21.9
Race/ethnicity		
Asian or Pacific Islander	92.7	7.3
Hispanic regardless of race	73.7	26.4
Black not of Hispanic origin	70.8	29.2
White not of Hispanic origin	88.2	11.8
Socioeconomic status (1992)		
Lowest quartile	70.5	29.5
Middle two quartiles	85.2	14.8
Highest quartile	95.8	4.2
Test quartile (1992)		
Lowest quartile	75.0	25.0
Middle two quartiles	88.3	11.7
Highest quartile	97.6	2.4

Source: NCES, National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988 94 9/25/95
Note: Rows may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Table 9B   Percentage of 1988 eighth graders in the highest 1992 test quartile reporting number of children of their own as of 1994, by various characteristics

	None	One or more
Total	97.6	2.4
Sex		
Male	98.5	1.5
Female	96.8	3.2
Race/ethnicity		
Asian or Pacific Islander	98.7	1.3
Hispanic regardless of race	97.4	2.6
Black not of Hispanic origin	94.5	5.5
White not of Hispanic origin	97.7	2.3
Socioeconomic status (1992)		
Lowest quartile	90.7	9.3
Middle two quartiles	96.4	3.6
Highest quartile	99.4	0.6

Source: NCES, National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988 94 9/25/95
Note: Rows may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.